

EXTENDED READING

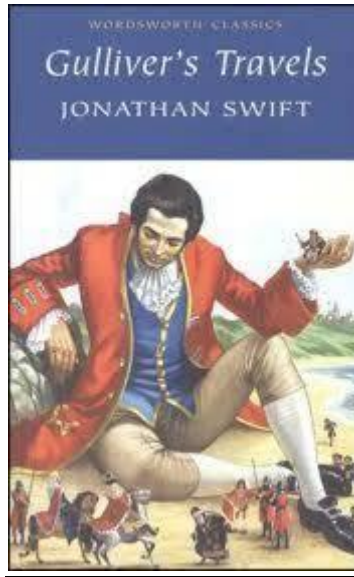
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GULLIVERS TRAVELS AT A GLIMPSE.....



Jonathan Swift, son of the English lawyer Jonathan Swift the elder, was born in Dublin, Ireland, on November 30, 1667. He grew up there in the care of his uncle before attending Trinity College at the age of fourteen, where he stayed for seven years, graduating in 1688. In that year, he became the secretary of Sir William Temple, an English politician and member of the Whig party. In 1694, he took religious orders in the Church of Ireland and then spent a year as a country parson. He then spent further time in the service of Temple before returning to Ireland to become the chaplain of the earl of Berkeley. Meanwhile, he had begun to write satires on the political and religious corruption surrounding him, working on *A Tale of a Tub*, which supports the position of the Anglican Church against its critics on the left and the right, and *The Battle of the Books*, which argues for the supremacy of the classics against modern thought and literature. He also wrote a number of political pamphlets in favor of the Whig party. In 1709 he went to London to campaign for the Irish church but was unsuccessful. After some conflicts with the Whig party, mostly because of Swift's strong allegiance to the church, he became a member of the more conservative Tory party in 1710.



Unfortunately for Swift, the Tory government fell out of power in 1714 and Swift, despite his fame for his writings, fell out of favor. Swift, who had been hoping to be assigned a position in the Church of England, instead returned to Dublin, where he became the dean of St. Patrick's. During his brief time in England, Swift had become friends with writers such as Alexander Pope, and during a meeting of their literary club, the Martinus Scriblerus Club, they decided to write satires of modern learning. The third voyage of *Gulliver's Travels* is assembled from the work Swift did during this time. However, the final work was not completed until 1726, and the narrative of the third voyage was actually the last one completed. After his return to Ireland, Swift became a staunch supporter of the Irish against English attempts to weaken their economy and political power, writing pamphlets such as the satirical *A Modest Proposal*, in which he suggests that the Irish problems of famine and overpopulation could be easily solved by having the babies of poor Irish subjects sold as delicacies to feed the rich.

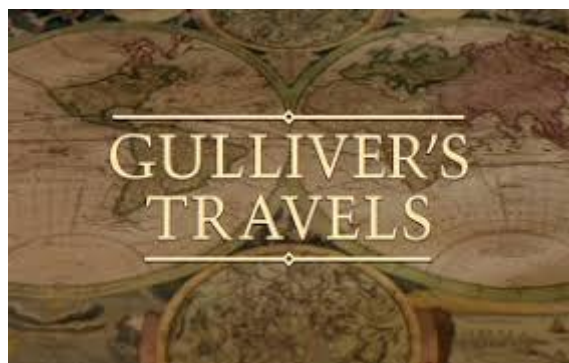
Gulliver's Travels was a controversial work when it was first published in 1726. In fact, it was not until almost ten years after its first printing that the book appeared with the entire text that Swift had originally intended it to have. Ever since, editors have excised many of the passages, particularly the more caustic ones dealing with bodily functions. Even without those passages, however, *Gulliver's Travels* serves as a biting satire, and Swift ensures that it is both humorous and critical, constantly attacking British and European society through its descriptions of imaginary countries.

Late in life, Swift seemed to many observers to become even more caustic and bitter than he had been. Three years before his death, he was declared unable to care for himself, and guardians were appointed. Based on these facts and on a comparison between Swift's fate and that of his character Gulliver, some people have concluded that he gradually became insane and that his insanity was a natural outgrowth of his indignation and outrage against humankind. However, the truth seems to be that Swift

was suddenly incapacitated by a paralytic stroke late in life, and that prior to this incident his mental capacities were unimpaired.



Gulliver's Travels is about a specific set of political conflicts, but if it were nothing more than that it would long ago have been forgotten. The staying power of the work comes from its depiction of the human condition and its often despairing, but occasionally hopeful, sketch of the possibilities for humanity to rein in its baser instincts.

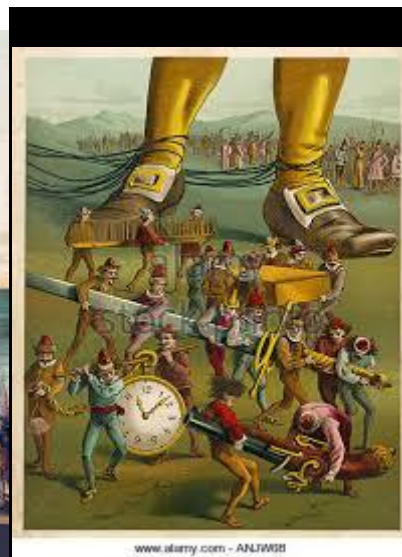


Plot Overview

Gulliver's Travels recounts the story of Lemuel Gulliver, a practical-minded Englishman trained as a surgeon who takes to the seas when his business fails. In a deadpan first-person narrative that rarely shows any signs of self-reflection or deep emotional response, Gulliver narrates the adventures that befall him on these travels.



Gulliver's adventure in Lilliput begins when he wakes after his shipwreck to find himself bound by innumerable tiny threads and addressed by tiny captors who are in awe of him but fiercely protective of their kingdom. They are not afraid to use violence against Gulliver, though their arrows are little more than pinpricks. But overall, they are hospitable, risking famine in their land by feeding Gulliver, who consumes more food than a thousand Lilliputians combined could. Gulliver is taken into the capital city by a vast wagon the Lilliputians have specially built. He is presented to the emperor, who is entertained by Gulliver, just as Gulliver is flattered by the attention of royalty. Eventually Gulliver becomes a national resource, used by the army in its war against the people of Blefuscu, whom the Lilliputians hate for doctrinal differences concerning the proper way to crack eggs. But things change when Gulliver is convicted of treason for putting out a fire in the royal palace with his urine and is condemned to be shot in the eyes and starved to death. Gulliver escapes to Blefuscu, where he is able to repair a boat he finds and set sail for England.

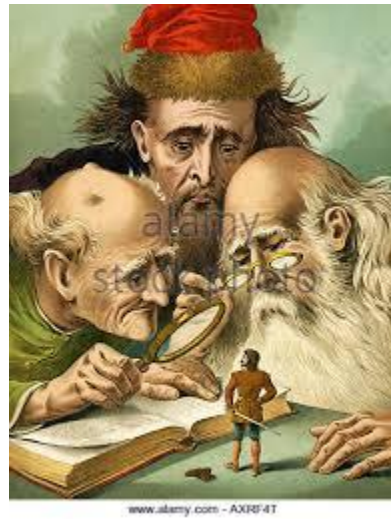




After staying in England with his wife and family for two months, Gulliver undertakes his next sea voyage, which takes him to a land of giants called Brobdingnag. Here, a field worker discovers him. The farmer initially treats him as little more than an animal, keeping him for amusement. The farmer eventually sells Gulliver to the queen, who makes him a courtly diversion and is entertained by his musical talents. Social life is easy for Gulliver after his discovery by the court, but not particularly enjoyable. Gulliver is often repulsed by the physicality of the Brobdingnagians, whose ordinary flaws are



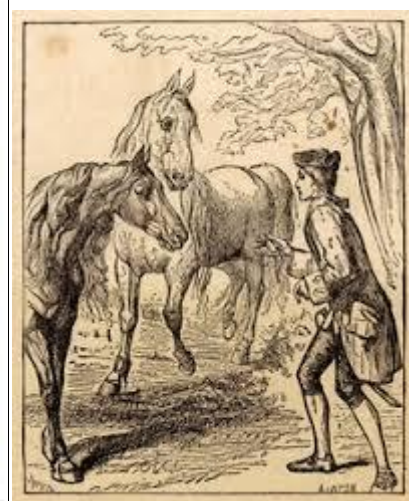
many times magnified by their huge size. Thus, when a couple of courtly ladies let him play on their naked bodies, he is not attracted to them but rather disgusted by their enormous skin pores and the sound of their torrential urination. He is generally startled by the ignorance of the people here—even the king knows nothing about politics. More unsettling findings in Brobdingnag come in the form of various animals of the realm that endanger his life. Even Brobdingnagian insects leave slimy trails on his food that make eating difficult. On a trip to the frontier, accompanying the royal couple, Gulliver leaves Brobdingnag when his cage is plucked up by an eagle and dropped into the sea.



Next, Gulliver sets sail again and, after an attack by pirates, ends up in Laputa, where a floating island inhabited by theoreticians and academics oppresses the land below, called Balnibarbi. The scientific research undertaken in Laputa and in Balnibarbi seems totally inane and impractical, and its residents too appear wholly out of touch with reality. Taking a short side trip to Glubbudbrib, Gulliver is able to witness the conjuring up of figures from history, such as Julius Caesar and other military leaders, whom he finds much less impressive than in books. After visiting the Luggnaggians and the Struldbrugs, the latter of which are senile immortals who prove that age does not bring wisdom, he is able to sail to Japan and from there back to England.





Finally, on his fourth journey, Gulliver sets out as captain of a ship, but after the mutiny of his crew and a long confinement in his cabin, he arrives in an unknown land. This land is populated by Houyhnhnms, rational-thinking horses who rule, and by Yahoos, brutish humanlike creatures who serve the Houyhnhnms. Gulliver sets about learning their language, and when he can speak he narrates his voyages to them and explains the constitution of England. He is treated with great courtesy and kindness by the horses and is enlightened by his many conversations with them and by his exposure to their noble culture. He wants to stay with the Houyhnhnms, but his bared body reveals to the horses that he is very much like a Yahoo, and he is banished. Gulliver is grief-stricken but agrees to leave. He fashions a canoe and makes his way to a nearby island, where he is picked up by a Portuguese ship captain who treats him well, though Gulliver cannot help now seeing the captain—and all humans—as shamefully Yahoo like. Gulliver then concludes his narrative with a claim that the lands he has visited belong by rights to England, as her colonies, even though he questions the whole idea of colonialism.



Yahoo and Houyhnhnm

- Yahoo- Hairy, eats meat,
- Houyhnhnm- horse, eats hay,

Character List

Gulliver - The narrator and protagonist of the story. Although Lemuel Gulliver's vivid and detailed style of narration makes it clear that he is intelligent and well educated, his perceptions are naïve and gullible. He has virtually no emotional life, or at least no awareness of it, and his comments are strictly factual. Indeed, sometimes his obsession with the facts of navigation, for example, becomes unbearable for us, as his fictional editor, Richard Sympson, makes clear when he explains having had to cut out nearly half of Gulliver's verbiage. Gulliver never thinks that the absurdities he encounters are funny and never makes the satiric connections between the lands he visits and his own home. Gulliver's naïveté makes the satire possible, as we pick up on things that Gulliver does not notice.

The emperor - The ruler of Lilliput. Like all Lilliputians, the emperor is fewer than six inches tall. His power and majesty impress Gulliver deeply, but to us he appears both laughable and sinister. Because of his tiny size, his belief that he can control Gulliver seems silly, but his willingness to execute his subjects for minor reasons of politics or honor gives him a frightening aspect. He is proud of possessing the tallest trees and biggest palace in the kingdom, but he is also quite hospitable, spending a fortune on his captive's food. The emperor is both a satire of the autocratic ruler and a strangely serious portrait of political power.

The farmer - Gulliver's first master in Brobdingnag. The farmer speaks to Gulliver, showing that he is willing to believe that the relatively tiny Gulliver may be as rational as he himself is, and treats him with gentleness. However, the farmer puts Gulliver on display around Brobdingnag, which clearly shows that he would rather profit from his discovery than converse with him as an equal. His exploitation of Gulliver as a laborer, which nearly starves Gulliver to death, seems less cruel than simpleminded. Generally, the farmer represents the average Brobdingnagian of no great gifts or intelligence, wielding an extraordinary power over Gulliver simply by virtue of his immense size.

Glumdalclitch - The farmer's nine-year-old daughter, who is forty feet tall. Glumdalclitch becomes Gulliver's friend and nursemaid, hanging him to sleep safely in her closet at night and teaching him the Brobdingnagian language by day. She is skilled at sewing and makes Gulliver several sets of new clothes, taking delight in dressing him. When the queen discovers that no one at court is suited to care for Gulliver, she invites Glumdalclitch to live at court as his sole babysitter, a function she performs with

great seriousness and attentiveness. To Glumdalclitch, Gulliver is basically a living doll, symbolizing the general status Gulliver has in Brobdingnag.

The queen - The queen of Brobdingnag, who is so delighted by Gulliver's beauty and charms that she agrees to buy him from the farmer for 1,000 pieces of gold. Gulliver appreciates her kindness after the hardships he suffers at the farmer's and shows his usual fawning love for royalty by kissing the tip of her little finger when presented before her. She possesses, in Gulliver's words, "infinite" wit and humor, though this description may entail a bit of Gulliver's characteristic flattery of superiors. The queen seems genuinely considerate, asking Gulliver whether he would consent to live at court instead of simply taking him in as a pet and inquiring into the reasons for his cold good-byes with the farmer. She is by no means a hero, but simply a pleasant, powerful person.

The king - The king of Brobdingnag, who, in contrast to the emperor of Lilliput, seems to be a true intellectual, well versed in political science among other disciplines. While his wife has an intimate, friendly relationship with the diminutive visitor, the king's relation to Gulliver is limited to serious discussions about the history and institutions of Gulliver's native land. He is thus a figure of rational thought who somewhat prefigures the Houyhnhnms in Book IV.

Lord Munodi - A lord of Lagado, capital of the underdeveloped land beneath Laputa, who hosts Gulliver and gives him a tour of the country on Gulliver's third voyage. Munodi is a rare example of practical-minded intelligence both in Lagado, where the applied sciences are wildly impractical, and in Laputa, where no one even considers practicality a virtue. He fell from grace with the ruling elite by counseling a commonsense approach to agriculture and land management in Lagado, an approach that was rejected even though it proved successful when applied to his own flourishing estate. Lord Munodi serves as a reality check for Gulliver on his third voyage, an objective-minded contrast to the theoretical delusions of the other inhabitants of Laputa and Lagado..

Yahoos - Unkempt humanlike beasts who live in servitude to the Houyhnhnms. Yahoos seem to belong to various ethnic groups, since there are blond Yahoos as well as dark-haired and redheaded ones. The men are characterized by their hairy bodies, and the women by their low-hanging breasts. They are naked, filthy, and extremely primitive in their eating habits. Yahoos are not capable of government, and thus they are kept as servants to the Houyhnhnms, pulling their carriages and performing manual tasks. They repel Gulliver with their lascivious sexual appetites, especially when an eleven-year-old Yahoo girl attempts to rape Gulliver as he is bathing naked. Yet despite Gulliver's revulsion for these disgusting creatures, he ends his writings referring to himself as a Yahoo, just as the Houyhnhnms do as they regretfully evict him

from their realm. Thus, “Yahoo” becomes another term for human, at least in the semideranged and self-loathing mind of Gulliver at the end of his fourth journey.

Houyhnhnms - Rational horses who maintain a simple, peaceful society governed by reason and truthfulness—they do not even have a word for “lie” in their language. Houyhnhnms are like ordinary horses, except that they are highly intelligent and deeply wise. They live in a sort of socialist republic, with the needs of the community put before individual desires. They are the masters of the Yahoos, the savage humanlike creatures in Houyhnhnmland. In all, the Houyhnhnms have the greatest impact on Gulliver throughout all his four voyages. He is grieved to leave them, not relieved as he is in leaving the other three lands, and back in England he relates better with his horses than with his human family. The Houyhnhnms thus are a measure of the extent to which Gulliver has become a misanthrope, or “human-hater”; he is certainly, at the end, a horse lover.

Gulliver’s Houyhnhnm master - The Houyhnhnm who first discovers Gulliver and takes him into his own home. Wary of Gulliver’s Yahoo-like appearance at first, the master is hesitant to make contact with him, but Gulliver’s ability to mimic the Houyhnhnm’s own words persuades the master to protect Gulliver. The master’s domestic cleanliness, propriety, and tranquil reasonableness of speech have an extraordinary impact on Gulliver. It is through this horse that Gulliver is led to reevaluate the differences between humans and beasts and to question humanity’s claims to rationality.

Don Pedro de Mendez - The Portuguese captain who takes Gulliver back to Europe after he is forced to leave the land of the Houyhnhnms. Don Pedro is naturally benevolent and generous, offering the half-crazed Gulliver his own best suit of clothes to replace the tatters he is wearing. But Gulliver meets his generosity with repulsion, as he cannot bear the company of Yahoos. By the end of the voyage, Don Pedro has won over Gulliver to the extent that he is able to have a conversation with him, but the captain’s overall Yahoo-like nature in Gulliver’s eyes alienates him from Gulliver to the very end.

Brobdignagians - Giants whom Gulliver meets on his second voyage. Brobdignagians are basically a reasonable and kindly people governed by a sense of justice. Even the farmer who abuses Gulliver at the beginning is gentle with him, and politely takes the trouble to say good-bye to him upon leaving him. The farmer’s daughter, Glumdalclitch, gives Gulliver perhaps the most kindhearted treatment he receives on any of his voyages. The Brobdignagians do not exploit him for personal or political reasons, as the Lilliputians do, and his life there is one of satisfaction and quietude. But the Brobdignagians do treat Gulliver as a plaything. When he tries to speak seriously with the king of Brobdignag about England, the

king dismisses the English as odious vermin, showing that deep discussion is not possible for Gulliver here.

Lilliputians and Blefuscudians - Two races of miniature people whom Gulliver meets on his first voyage. Lilliputians and Blefuscudians are prone to conspiracies and jealousies, and while they treat Gulliver well enough materially, they are quick to take advantage of him in political intrigues of various sorts. The two races have been in a longstanding war with each other over the interpretation of a reference in their common holy scripture to the proper way to eat eggs. Gulliver helps the Lilliputians defeat the Blefuscudian navy, but he eventually leaves Lilliput and receives a warm welcome in the court of Blefuscu, by which Swift satirizes the arbitrariness of international relations.

Laputans - Absentminded intellectuals who live on the floating island of Laputa, encountered by Gulliver on his third voyage. The Laputans are parodies of theoreticians, who have scant regard for any practical results of their own research. They are so inwardly absorbed in their own thoughts that they must be shaken out of their meditations by special servants called flappers, who shake rattles in their ears. During Gulliver's stay among them, they do not mistreat him, but are generally unpleasant and dismiss him as intellectually deficient. They do not care about down-to-earth things like the dilapidation of their own houses, but worry intensely about abstract matters like the trajectories of comets and the course of the sun. They are dependent in their own material needs on the land below them, called Lagado, above which they hover by virtue of a magnetic field, and from which they periodically raise up food supplies. In the larger context of Gulliver's journeys, the Laputans are a parody of the excesses of theoretical pursuits and the uselessness of purely abstract knowledge.

Mary Burton Gulliver - Gulliver's wife, whose perfunctory mention in the first paragraphs of *Gulliver's Travels* demonstrates how unsentimental and unemotional Gulliver is. He makes no reference to any affection for his wife, either here or later in his travels when he is far away from her, and his detachment is so cool as to raise questions about his ability to form human attachments. When he returns to England, she is merely one part of his former existence, and he records no emotion even as she hugs him wildly. The most important facts about her in Gulliver's mind are her social origin and the income she generates.

Richard Sympson - Gulliver's cousin, self-proclaimed intimate friend, and the editor and publisher of *Gulliver's Travels*. It was in Richard Sympson's name that Jonathan Swift arranged for the publication of his narrative, thus somewhat mixing the fictional and actual worlds. Sympson is the fictional author of the prefatory note to *Gulliver's Travels*, entitled "The Publisher to the Readers." This note justifies Sympson's elimination of nearly half of the original manuscript material on the grounds that it was

irrelevant, a statement that Swift includes so as to allow us to doubt Gulliver's overall wisdom and ability to distinguish between important facts and trivial details.

James Bates - An eminent London surgeon under whom Gulliver serves as an apprentice after graduating from Cambridge. Bates helps get Gulliver his first job as a ship's surgeon and then offers to set up a practice with him. After Bates's death, Gulliver has trouble maintaining the business, a failure that casts doubt on his competence, though he himself has other explanations for the business's failure. Bates is hardly mentioned in the travels, though he is surely at least as responsible for Gulliver's welfare as some of the more exotic figures Gulliver meets. Nevertheless, Gulliver fleshes out figures such as the queen of Brobdingnag much more thoroughly in his narrative, underscoring the sharp contrast between his reticence regarding England and his long-windedness about foreigners.

Abraham Pannell - The commander of the ship on which Gulliver first sails, the *Swallow*. Traveling to the Levant, or the eastern Mediterranean, and beyond, Gulliver spends three and a half years on Pannell's ship. Virtually nothing is mentioned about Pannell, which heightens our sense that Gulliver's fascination with exotic types is not matched by any interest in his fellow countrymen.

William Prichard - The master of the *Antelope*, the ship on which Gulliver embarks for the South Seas at the outset of his first journey, in 1699. When the *Antelope* sinks, Gulliver is washed ashore on Lilliput. No details are given about the personality of Prichard, and he is not important in Gulliver's life or in the unfolding of the novel's plot. That Gulliver takes pains to name him accurately reinforces our impression that he is obsessive about facts but not always reliable in assessing overall significance.

Flimnap - The Lord High Treasurer of Lilliput, who conceives a jealous hatred for Gulliver when he starts believing that his wife is having an affair with him. Flimnap is clearly paranoid, since the possibility of a love affair between Gulliver and a Lilliputian is wildly unlikely. Flimnap is a portrait of the weaknesses of character to which any human is prone but that become especially dangerous in those who wield great power.

Reldresal - The Principal Secretary of Private Affairs in Lilliput, who explains to Gulliver the history of the political tensions between the two principal parties in the realm, the High-Heels and the Low-Heels. Reldresal is more a source of much-needed information for Gulliver than a well-developed personality, but he does display personal courage and trust in allowing Gulliver to hold him in his palm while he talks politics. Within the convoluted context of Lilliput's factions and conspiracies, such friendliness reminds us that fond personal relations may still exist even in this overheated political climate.

Skyresh Bolgolam - The High Admiral of Lilliput, who is the only member of the administration to oppose Gulliver's liberation. Gulliver imagines that Skyresh's enmity is simply personal, though there is no apparent reason for such hostility. Arguably, Skyresh's hostility may be merely a tool to divert Gulliver from the larger system of Lilliputian exploitation to which he is subjected.

Tramecksan - Also known as the High-Heels, a Lilliputian political group reminiscent of the British Tories. Tramecksan policies are said to be more agreeable to the ancient constitution of Lilliput, and while the High-Heels appear greater in number than the Low-Heels, their power is lesser. Unlike the king, the crown prince is believed to sympathize with the Tramecksan, wearing one low heel and one high heel, causing him to limp slightly.

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

MIGHT VERSUS RIGHT

Gulliver's Travels implicitly poses the question of whether physical power or moral righteousness should be the governing factor in social life. Gulliver experiences the advantages of physical might both as one who has it, as a giant in Lilliput where he can defeat the Blefuscudian navy by virtue of his immense size, and as one who does not have it, as a miniature visitor to Brobdingnag where he is harassed by the hugeness of everything from insects to household pets. His first encounter with another society is one of entrapment, when he is physically tied down by the Lilliputians; later, in Brobdingnag, he is enslaved by a farmer. He also observes physical force used against others, as with the Houyhnhnms' chaining up of the Yahoos.

But alongside the use of physical force, there are also many claims to power based on moral correctness. The whole point of the egg controversy that has set Lilliput against Blefuscu is not merely a cultural difference but, instead, a religious and moral issue related to the proper interpretation of a passage in their holy book. This difference of opinion seems to justify, in their eyes at least, the warfare it has sparked. Similarly, the use of physical force against the Yahoos is justified for the Houyhnhnms by their sense of moral superiority: they are cleaner, better behaved, and more rational. But overall, the novel tends to show that claims to rule on the basis of moral righteousness are often just as arbitrary as, and sometimes simply disguises for, simple physical subjugation. The Laputans keep the lower land of Balnibarbi in check through force because they believe themselves to be more rational, even though we might see them as absurd and unpleasant. Similarly, the ruling elite of Balnibarbi believes itself to be in the right in

driving Lord Munodi from power, although we perceive that Munodi is the rational party. Claims to moral superiority are, in the end, as hard to justify as the random use of physical force to dominate others.

THE INDIVIDUAL VERSUS SOCIETY

Like many narratives about voyages to nonexistent lands, *Gulliver's Travels* explores the idea of utopia—an imaginary model of the ideal community. The idea of a utopia is an ancient one, going back at least as far as the description in Plato's *Republic* of a city-state governed by the wise and expressed most famously in English by Thomas More's *Utopia*. Swift nods to both works in his own narrative, though his attitude toward utopia is much more skeptical, and one of the main aspects he points out about famous historical utopias is the tendency to privilege the collective group over the individual. The children of Plato's *Republic* are raised communally, with no knowledge of their biological parents, in the understanding that this system enhances social fairness. Swift has the Lilliputians similarly raise their offspring collectively, but its results are not exactly utopian, since Lilliput is torn by conspiracies, jealousies, and backstabbing.

1 The Houyhnhnms also practice strict family planning, dictating that the parents of two females should exchange a child with a family of two males, so that the male-to-female ratio is perfectly maintained. Indeed, they come closer to the utopian ideal than the Lilliputians in their wisdom and rational simplicity. But there is something unsettling about the Houyhnhnms' indistinct personalities and about how they are the only social group that Gulliver encounters who do not have proper names. Despite minor physical differences, they are all so good and rational that they are more or less interchangeable, without individual identities. In their absolute fusion with their society and lack of individuality, they are in a sense the exact opposite of Gulliver, who has hardly any sense of belonging to his native society and exists only as an individual eternally wandering the seas. Gulliver's intense grief when forced to leave the Houyhnhnms may have something to do with his longing for union with a community in which he can lose his human identity. In any case, such a union is impossible for him, since he is not a horse, and all the other societies he visits make him feel alienated as well.

Gulliver's Travels could in fact be described as one of the first novels of modern alienation, focusing on an individual's repeated failures to integrate into societies to which he does not belong. England itself is not much of a homeland for Gulliver, and, with his surgeon's business unprofitable and his father's estate insufficient to support him, he may be right to feel alienated from it. He never speaks fondly or nostalgically about England, and every time he returns home, he is quick to leave again. Gulliver never complains explicitly about feeling lonely, but the embittered and antisocial misanthrope we see at the end of the novel is clearly a profoundly isolated individual. Thus, if Swift's satire mocks the excesses of communal life, it

may also mock the excesses of individualism in its portrait of a miserable and lonely Gulliver talking to his horses at home in England.

THE LIMITS OF HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

The idea that humans are not meant to know everything and that all understanding has a natural limit is important in *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift singles out theoretical knowledge in particular for attack: his portrait of the disagreeable and self-centered Laputans, who show blatant contempt for those who are not sunk in private theorizing, is a clear satire against those who pride themselves on knowledge above all else. Practical knowledge is also satirized when it does not produce results, as in the academy of Balnibarbi, where the experiments for extracting sunbeams from cucumbers amount to nothing. Swift insists that there is a realm of understanding into which humans are simply not supposed to venture. Thus his depictions of rational societies, like Brobdingnag and Houyhnhnmland, emphasize not these people's knowledge or understanding of abstract ideas but their ability to live their lives in a wise and steady way.

The Brobdingnagian king knows shockingly little about the abstractions of political science, yet his country seems prosperous and well governed. Similarly, the Houyhnhnms know little about arcane subjects like astronomy, though they know how long a month is by observing the moon, since that knowledge has a practical effect on their well-being. Aspiring to higher fields of knowledge would be meaningless to them and would interfere with their happiness. In such contexts, it appears that living a happy and well-ordered life seems to be the very thing for which Swift thinks knowledge is useful.

Swift also emphasizes the importance of self-understanding. Gulliver is initially remarkably lacking in self-reflection and self-awareness. He makes no mention of his emotions, passions, dreams, or aspirations, and he shows no interest in describing his own psychology to us. Accordingly, he may strike us as frustratingly hollow or empty, though it is likely that his personal emptiness is part of the overall meaning of the novel. By the end, he has come close to a kind of twisted self-knowledge in his deranged belief that he is a Yahoo. His revulsion with the human condition, shown in his shabby treatment of the generous Don Pedro, extends to himself as well, so that he ends the novel in a thinly disguised state of self-hatred. Swift may thus be saying that self-knowledge has its necessary limits just as theoretical knowledge does, and that if we look too closely at ourselves we might not be able to carry on living happily.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

EXCREMENT

While it may seem a trivial or laughable motif, the recurrent mention of excrement in Gulliver's Travels actually has a serious philosophical significance in the narrative. It symbolizes everything that is crass and ignoble about the human body and about human existence in general, and it obstructs any attempt to view humans as wholly spiritual or mentally transcendent creatures. Since the Enlightenment culture of eighteenth-century England tended to view humans optimistically as noble souls rather than vulgar bodies, Swift's emphasis on the common filth of life is a slap in the face of the philosophers of his day. Thus, when Gulliver urinates to put out a fire in Lilliput, or when Brobdingnagian flies defecate on his meals, or when the scientist in Lagado works to transform excrement back into food, we are reminded how very little human reason has to do with everyday existence. Swift suggests that the human condition in general is dirtier and lowlier than we might like to believe it is.

FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Gulliver appears to be a gifted linguist, knowing at least the basics of several European languages and even a fair amount of ancient Greek. This knowledge serves him well, as he is able to disguise himself as a Dutchman in order to facilitate his entry into Japan, which at the time only admitted the Dutch. But even more important, his linguistic gifts allow him to learn the languages of the exotic lands he visits with a dazzling speed and, thus, gain access to their culture quickly. He learns the languages of the Lilliputians, the Brobdingnagians, and even the neighing tongue of the Houyhnhnms. He is meticulous in recording the details of language in his narrative, often giving the original as well as the translation. One would expect that such detail would indicate a cross-cultural sensitivity, a kind of anthropologist's awareness of how things vary from culture to culture. Yet surprisingly, Gulliver's mastery of foreign languages generally does not correspond to any real interest in cultural differences. He compares any of the governments he visits to that of his native England, and he rarely even speculates on how or why cultures are different at all. Thus, his facility for translation does not indicate a culturally comparative mind, and we are perhaps meant to yearn for a narrator who is a bit less able to remember the Brobdingnagian word for "lark" and better able to offer a more illuminating kind of cultural analysis.

CLOTHING

Critics have noted the extraordinary attention that Gulliver pays to clothes throughout his journeys. Every time he gets a rip in his shirt or is forced to adopt some native garment to replace one of his own, he recounts the clothing details with great precision. We are told how his pants are falling apart in Lilliput, so that as the army marches between his legs they get quite an eyeful. We are informed about the mouse skin he wears in Brobdingnag, and how the finest silks of the land are as thick as blankets on him. In one sense, these descriptions are obviously an easy narrative device with which Swift can chart his protagonist's progression from one culture to another: the more ragged his clothes become and the stranger his new wardrobe, the farther he is from the comforts and conventions of England. His journey to new lands is also thus a journey into new clothes. When he is picked up by Don Pedro after his fourth voyage and offered a new suit of clothes, Gulliver vehemently refuses, preferring his wild animal skins. We sense that Gulliver may well never fully reintegrate into European society.

But the motif of clothing carries a deeper, more psychologically complex meaning as well. Gulliver's intense interest in the state of his clothes may signal a deep-seated anxiety about his identity, or lack thereof. He does not seem to have much selfhood: one critic has called him an "abyss," a void where an

individual character should be. If clothes make the man, then perhaps Gulliver's obsession with the state of his wardrobe may suggest that he desperately needs to be fashioned as a personality. Significantly, the two moments when he describes being naked in the novel are two deeply troubling or humiliating experiences: the first when he is the boy toy of the Brobdingnagian maids who let him cavort nude on their mountainous breasts, and the second when he is assaulted by an eleven-year-old Yahoo girl as he bathes. Both incidents suggest more than mere prudery. Gulliver associates nudity with extreme vulnerability, even when there is no real danger present—a pre-teen girl is hardly a threat to a grown man, at least in physical terms. The state of nudity may remind Gulliver of how nonexistent he feels without the reassuring cover of clothing.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

LILLIPUTIANS The Lilliputians symbolize humankind's wildly excessive pride in its own puny existence. Swift fully intends the irony of representing the tiniest race visited by Gulliver as by far the most vainglorious and smug, both collectively and individually. There is surely no character more odious in all of Gulliver's travels than the noxious Skyresh. There is more backbiting and conspiracy in Lilliput than anywhere else, and more of the pettiness of small minds who imagine themselves to be grand. Gulliver is a naïve consumer of the Lilliputians' grandiose imaginings: he is flattered by the attention of their royal family and cowed by their threats of punishment, forgetting that they have no real physical power over him. Their formally worded condemnation of Gulliver on grounds of treason is a model of pompous and self-important verbiage, but it works quite effectively on the naïve Gulliver.

The Lilliputians show off not only to Gulliver but to themselves as well. There is no mention of armies proudly marching in any of the other societies Gulliver visits—only in Lilliput and neighboring Blefuscu are the six-inch inhabitants possessed of the need to show off their patriotic glories with such displays. When the Lilliputian emperor requests that Gulliver serve as a kind of makeshift Arch of Triumph for the troops to pass under, it is a pathetic reminder that their grand parade—in full view of Gulliver's nether regions—is supremely silly, a basically absurd way to boost the collective ego of the nation. Indeed, the war with Blefuscu is itself an absurdity springing from wounded vanity, since the cause is not a material concern like disputed territory but, rather, the proper interpretation of scripture by the emperor's forebears and the hurt feelings resulting from the disagreement. All in all, the Lilliputians symbolize misplaced human pride, and point out Gulliver's inability to diagnose it correctly.

BROBDINGNAGIANS

The Brobdingnagians symbolize the private, personal, and physical side of humans when examined up close and in great detail. The philosophical era of the Enlightenment tended to overlook the routines of everyday life and the sordid or tedious little facts of existence, but in Brobdingnag such facts become very important for Gulliver, sometimes matters of life and death. An eighteenth-century philosopher could afford to ignore the fly buzzing around his head or the skin pores on his servant girl, but in his shrunken state Gulliver is forced to pay great attention to such things. He is forced take the domestic sphere seriously as well. In other lands it is difficult for Gulliver, being such an outsider, to get glimpses of family relations or private affairs, but in Brobdingnag he is treated as a doll or a plaything, and thus is made privy to the urination of housemaids and the sexual lives of women. The Brobdingnagians do not symbolize a solely negative human characteristic, as the Laputans do. They are not merely ridiculous—some aspects of them are disgusting, like their gigantic stench and the excrement left by their insects, but others are noble, like the queen's goodwill toward Gulliver and the king's commonsense views of politics. More than anything else, the Brobdingnagians symbolize a dimension of human existence visible at close range, under close scrutiny.

LAPUTANS

The Laputans represent the folly of theoretical knowledge that has no relation to human life and no use in the actual world. As a profound cultural conservative, Swift was a critic of the newfangled ideas springing up around him at the dawn of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, a period of great intellectual experimentation and theorization. He much preferred the traditional knowledge that had been tested over centuries. Laputa symbolizes the absurdity of knowledge that has never been tested or applied, the ludicrous side of Enlightenment intellectualism. Even down below in Balnibarbi, where the local academy is more inclined to practical application, knowledge is not made socially useful as Swift demands. Indeed, theoretical knowledge there has proven positively disastrous, resulting in the ruin of agriculture and architecture and the impoverishment of the population. Even up above, the pursuit of theoretical understanding has not improved the lot of the Laputans. They have few material worries, dependent as they are upon the Balnibarbians below. But they are tormented by worries about the trajectories of comets and other astronomical speculations: their theories have not made them wise, but neurotic and disagreeable. The Laputans do not symbolize reason itself but rather the pursuit of a form of knowledge that is not directly related to the improvement of human life.

HOUYHNHNMS

The Houyhnhnms represent an ideal of rational existence, a life governed by sense and moderation of which philosophers since Plato have long dreamed. Indeed, there are echoes of Plato's *Republic* in the Houyhnhnms' rejection of light entertainment and vain displays of luxury, their appeal to reason rather than any holy writings as the criterion for proper action, and their communal approach to family planning. As in Plato's ideal community, the Houyhnhnms have no need to lie nor any word for lying. They do not use force but only strong exhortation. Their subjugation of the Yahoos appears more necessary than cruel and perhaps the best way to deal with an unfortunate blot on their otherwise ideal society. In these ways and others, the Houyhnhnms seem like model citizens, and Gulliver's intense grief when he is forced to leave them suggests that they have made an impact on him greater than that of any other society he has visited. His derangement on Don Pedro's ship, in which he snubs the generous man as a Yahoo-like creature, implies that he strongly identifies with the Houyhnhnms.

But we may be less ready than Gulliver to take the Houyhnhnms as ideals of human existence. They have no names in the narrative nor any need for names, since they are virtually interchangeable, with little individual identity. Their lives seem harmonious and happy, although quite lacking in vigor, challenge, and excitement. Indeed, this apparent ease may be why Swift chooses to make them horses rather than human types like every other group in the novel. He may be hinting, to those more insightful than Gulliver, that the Houyhnhnms should not be considered human ideals at all. In any case, they symbolize a standard of rational existence to be either espoused or rejected by both Gulliver and us.

ENGLAND As the site of his father's disappointingly "small estate" and Gulliver's failing business, England seems to symbolize deficiency or insufficiency, at least in the financial sense that matters most to Gulliver. England is passed over very quickly in the first paragraph of Chapter I, as if to show that it is simply there as the starting point to be left quickly behind. Gulliver seems to have very few nationalistic or patriotic feelings about England, and he rarely mentions his homeland on his travels. In this sense, *Gulliver's Travels* is quite unlike other travel narratives like the *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus misses his homeland and laments his wanderings. England is where Gulliver's wife and family live, but they too are hardly mentioned. Yet Swift chooses to have Gulliver return home after each of his four journeys instead of having him continue on one long trip to four different places, so that England is kept constantly in the picture and given a steady, unspoken importance. By the end of the fourth journey, England is brought more explicitly into the fabric of *Gulliver's Travels* when Gulliver, in his neurotic state, starts confusing Houyhnhnmland with his homeland, referring to Englishmen as Yahoos. The distinction between native and foreign thus unravels—the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos are not just races populating a faraway land but rather types that Gulliver projects upon those around him. The possibility thus arises that all the races Gulliver encounters could be versions of the English and that his travels merely allow him to see various aspects of human nature more clearly.

REVIEW

1. How does Swift use language and style for the purpose of satire? How does his style change as the story progresses?

Scattered among the standard narrative style of most of Gulliver's travels are legal documents and reports, such as the inventory of Gulliver's possessions and the list of obligations presented to him by the Lilliputians. There are also brief passages in which Swift, by his style alone, ridicules the linguistic excesses of various specialists. A good example is at the beginning of Part II, Chapter I, where Gulliver uses complicated nautical jargon. The effect is so overdone that, instead of coming off as a demonstration of Gulliver's in-depth knowledge of sailing, the passage works as a satire of sailing language and, more

generally, of any kind of specialist jargon. A similar passage occurs in Part III, Chapter III, where Gulliver's painstaking description of the geometry of Laputa serves as a satire of philosophical jargon.

Over the course of the novel, there are several changes in Swift's style. In the first two voyages, the style is constant: it is a relatively lighthearted but still biting satire of European culture and politics, framed as an adventure among dwarves and giants. In the third voyage, the tone shifts. Gulliver becomes less of a personality and more of an abstract observer. His judgments of the societies he encounters become more direct and unmediated, and the overall narrative becomes less of an adventure and more of a scattered satire on abstract thought. In the fourth voyage, the tone becomes, for the most part, much more serious than in the first three adventures. Gulliver too is more serious and more desperate, and his change in personality is reflected in a style that is darker, more somber, and more cynical.

2. Does Gulliver change as the story progresses? Does he learn from his adventures?

Gulliver is somewhat more tranquil and less restless at the end of the story than he is at the beginning. In desiring first to stay with the Houyhnhnms, then to find an island on which he can live in exile, Gulliver shows that his adventures have taught him that a simple life, one without the complexities and weaknesses of human society, may be best. At the same time, his tranquility is superficial—lying not far below the surface is a deep distaste for humanity that is aroused as soon as the crew of Don Pedro de Mendez captures him. From our point of view, after we have looked at the world through Gulliver's eyes for much of the novel, Gulliver undergoes several interesting transformations: from the naïve Englishman to the experienced but still open-minded world traveler of the first two voyages; then to the jaded island-hopper of the third voyage; and finally to the cynical, disillusioned, and somewhat insane misanthrope of the fourth voyage.

3. Is Gulliver an everyman figure or does he have a distinctive personality of his own?

In many ways, Gulliver's role as a generic human is more important than any personal opinions or abilities he may have. Fate and circumstance conspire to lead him from place to place, while he never really asserts his own desires. By minimizing the importance of Gulliver as a specific person, Swift puts the focus on the social satire itself. At the same time, Gulliver himself becomes more and more a subject of satire as the story progresses. At the beginning, he is a standard-issue European adventurer; by the end, he has become a misanthrope who totally rejects human society. It is in the fourth voyage that Gulliver becomes more than simply a pair of eyes through which we see a series of unusual societies. He is,

instead, a jaded adventurer who has seen human follies—particularly that of pride—at their most extreme, and as a result has descended into what looks like, and probably is, a kind of madness.

Suggested Essay Topics

1. Gulliver is so eager to assert his own country's importance to the Brobdingnagians. How does this desire compare to the Lilliputians' desire to assert their importance to Gulliver?
2. What is the significance, if any, of the order in which Gulliver's journeys take place? How does each adventure build on the previous one?
3. Depict the allegorical significance of the floating island of Laputa.
4. Gulliver keeps traveling despite his many misfortunes. Explain?
5. Why does Gulliver want to stay with the Houyhnhnms? Does his desire make sense in light of the other societies he has visited?
6. How do the Lilliputians view the threat that Gulliver represents?